

Man and Master

A Play in One Act

by Percival Wilde

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CHARACTERS.
A, a man between fifty and sixty years of age. He is quiet but well dressed and presents a very respectable appearance.
B, possibly thirty and a typical criminal. His face which is partly hidden at the beginning of the act by a disreputable ulster, shows marks of dissipation. His clothes are shabby and do not suit him; they look like "hand-me-downs."

THE SCENE.—A secluded spot in a park. There is a bench, numerous trees, bushes, etc. A walk crosses the stage from up right to down left.

THE TIME.—Sunrise. A day toward the end of Winter.

The curtain rises slowly, showing a dimly lit scene. The sun is rising and one is barely able to distinguish the figure of B, wrapped up in his ulster, lying on the bench.

There is a crackling noise off right; evidently someone is walking along the leafy path. B jumps up like a flash, listens intently for a few seconds; then, drawing a revolver from his pocket, he hides behind the bushes.

For a few seconds there is silence. Then the footsteps become plainly audible, and a man, A, enters right and walks across the stage slowly. He stops, pulls a cigar from his pocket and bites on the end. A is on match does not light. A second is better, and shielding it with his hands he tries to light his cigar.

In the meantime B has left his concealment and approaches A from the rear, grasping his revolver by the barrel and ready to strike. Very stealthily he nears him.

A hears nothing until B is very close. Then he starts, wheels about, but too late. B strikes him a crushing blow with the butt of his revolver, and A falls like a log, in front of the bench, one foot away, without a cry.

B polishes his weapon for a second blow, but there seems to be no need for it. Turns back A's eyelid and he evidently is satisfied, for he puts down the revolver on the bench. Then turning to A he rips open his coat and vest and searches him. A groans, suddenly lifts his head and looks at B, whose back is turned. Drops head again and groans again. Slowly his right hand approaches the revolver on the bench, while B counts, half audibly, "Forty, forty-five, fifty-five, sixty, etc."

A seizes the revolver and shoots it off into the air. B starts, turns but A, still on the ground, covers him.

A—Hands up! (B complies. A rises quickly. B has dropped scotch to the ground.) Pick it up (B picks it up, hands it to A.) Thank you. (Puts it in his pocket.) Now, my watch. (Bus.)

Thank you. (Takes off his derby and examines it.) Very careless of you. You almost hurt me. Don't you know any better than to go around hitting people like that?

(B makes a move.) Oh, don't go away yet. We're going to have a little talk first. Sit down. (B sits right of bench. A left. Puts revolver on bench at his right. Begins to light cigar. B's hand moves toward revolver. Without interrupting lighting his cigar A takes revolver from right to left.) No; you may not do that. (Turns right, match still burning.) I invented that trick. (Finishes lighting his cigar.) Rather clever, wasn't it? If I'd yelled you'd've knocked me on the head again and made a good job of it. So I kept quiet—until your back was turned. (Rising and stretching his arms.) And I fancy I've taught you something about your own business! How about it?

A—Agh!

A—Peevish, aren't you? Mean of me to spoil the job. I'm a rotten sort of fellow, though—well, why don't you say something?

B—Curse you!

A (staggering back in mock dismay)—What! I—I don't think you like me.

B—You've guessed it.

A—Ah! Short and sweet—just like that! Go on! Go on!

B—What are you going to do with me?

A—Do with you?

B—Yes!

A (reflectively)—Well, I might present you to the museum—or to the zoo. You'd look just about right between the spotted hyena and the African gorilla. (B rises. A waves revolver.) Oh, wait! Wait! Your cage isn't ready yet! There's no hurry—they've got to sweep it out first; put in clean straw, you know, all that sort of thing. Don't be so impetuous! (Takes off his derby and rubbing his head.) Lucky I had my hat on. Otherwise, what would you have done with me?

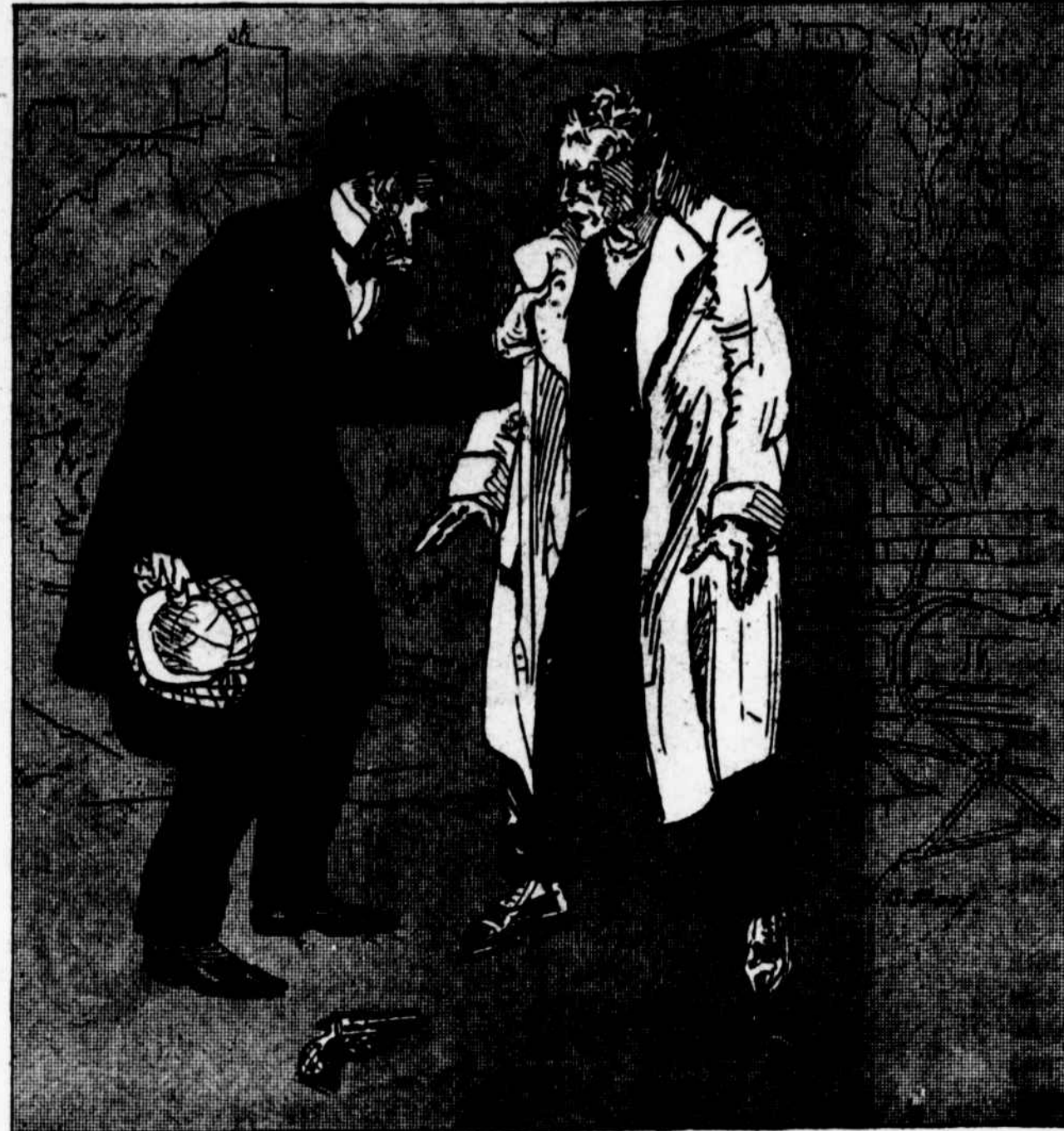
B—With you?

A—With my body, I mean.

B—Agh!

A (imitating)—Agh! That's no answer. Would you have left my mortal remains cluttering up the scenery, or would you have dropped me into the sewer? Eh? (Struck with a sudden idea.) And how many were there before me? Was business GOOD this morning?

B—Agh!



"Don't you know me, Mr. Richard?"

A—There you go again! There's no use being agreeable with you—you've got a grudge. You got up with the wrong foot this morning. Well (leaning back comfortably), I'm waiting. (During the following dialogue he slowly breaks the revolver and puts the shells in his pocket.)

B—Waiting?

A—Um, humh. Out with it—the

hard-luck story. You fellows always have hard-luck stories ready. Tell me yours. Was it wine, or woman, or the ponies, or were you just naturally rotten? (B gets up.) Oh, don't run! I can run faster than you, and I can lick you with one hand behind my back! I've got healthy blood in my veins and healthy muscle on my arms. That's what honest living does! I can handle three of you, and you know it! (B sits down.) Here, let's have a look at you.

B—No.

A—What? Take off your cap.

B—No, no!

A—You won't, eh? Well (short tussle), here goes. (A pulls off B's cap. Staggered back dumfounded.) Good Lord! Mr. Richard!

B (springing to his feet)—What?

A (joyfully, taking him by the lapel)—Don't you know me, Mr. Richard?

B—You! You!

A—I'm Martin, the butler. Old Martin, who used to dandle you on his knees when you were a baby. Don't you know me now, Mr. Richard?

B (with delight)—Martin! I haven't seen you since—(suddenly recollecting the situation and breaking off.)

A—Since you came home from college, Mr. Richard, do you remember? What a fine lad you were! And how proud we were of you! (In a terribly altered voice.) How proud we were—

B—Oh, cut it!

A (sternly)—You went wrong and your mother's money got you out of it. You promised, you swore you'd live straight. You cried like a child, and I believed you. I believed you. And then—then—

B (sullenly)—I know what I did.

A—Money couldn't get you out of it that time. You were sent to jail. Your mother's son went to jail!

B (defiantly)—Well, she knew it!

A (shaking his head slowly)—No.

B—What do you mean?

A—She never knew it. She will never know it.

B—But I wrote her—

A—Yes, from prison.

B—And she answered!

A—No.

B—But I got letters.

A—I wrote them. She thinks you're dead.

B—She sent me money!

A—My money! (B staggers back.) Good Lord! But I had to save to give it to you!

B (in a rage)—So that's why I didn't get all I asked for! What business did you have to come between us?

A—The business of any decent man.

B—You're nothing but a servant! You forget your place!

A—And you—remember yours? No. I don't regret what I did.

B—She'd give me more money!

A—I don't think so.

B—What?

A—Your letters—with "prison" printed on the sheet!

B—Well?

A—If she'd seen one it would have killed her!

B—Ah, g'wan!

A (correctly)—Believe me, Mr. Richard, I know.

B—Then I'd a gotten still more money!

A (horrid)—What do you mean?

B—She'd left it to me, wouldn't she?

A—Good God! So that's all you care for her?

B—Aw, don't preach! There'd be a tidy little bit coming to you, eh? (Looks off left.) Look! There's a policeman just going by. Are you going to turn me over to him?

A (visibly perplexed)—I—I don't know.

B (sneering)—You don't know? Then you'd better make up your mind mighty quick! Look! He's passing! (Standing on bench.) He can hear if you shout! Now, he's turned his back. He's going away! Going! Going! Going! Gone! Too late!

A—Do you want to be arrested?

B—Yes!

A—Why?

B—I'll tell 'em my name—my real name! Tell 'em where I used to live! And they'll have it in the papers—and there'll be a stink!

Wow! And mother'll read it! Mother, who's too good for me! Little boy! Eh? Why, mother will be just tickled pink! The family name in the mud!

A—No. It won't do.

B—Won't do? Why not?

A—Your mother is in Europe.

B—In Europe?

A—Traveling.

B—Then what are you doing here? (Change of tune.) Has she fired you?

A—No, she hasn't fired me. I'm taking care of the house.

B—Alone?

A—Yes.

B—But there's a cable to the other side! If the papers print all about me here they'll wire it over!

A—Yes, they'll wire it over.

B—And she'll read it!

A—No.

B—She's been blind for two years.

A—Curse it all!

B—And I'll see that her secretary doesn't let her know a word about it.

B—What? Mother has a secretary, while her little boy—

A (interrupting)—Tries to hold up her butler! Look here, Mr. Richard, why don't you try to turn over a new leaf?

B—Preaching again! Preaching!

A—No. I'm not preaching. I'm not telling you to be honest because it's right. I'm telling you to be honest because it pays!

B—Pays nothing! You're honest, and look what you've got for it! What are you paid?

A—Fifty-five dollars a month.

B—Fifty-five dollars a month! And you're a servant, to be ordered around by anybody, to wait on mother at table, to tremble if somebody's angry at you!

A—Perhaps, Mr. Richard. (Slowly.) But which one of us trembles at the sight of a policeman? He touches his hat to me, Mr. Richard, even though I am a servant.

You, my master. If he recognizes you, he'll arrest you! I'm getting old, Mr. Richard, but my old age will be taken care of. You're still a young man, and unless you're very, very lucky you're going to spend half of your life in a cage, like a wild animal.

B (defiantly)—Well, I can take care of myself.

A—Can you?

B—And if they catch me (shrug) it's all in the game.

A—Yes, it's all in the game. But why must you play that game? Why can't you play the other game? You're clever. You were always clever. Think what a fool a clever man is to be a crook! I'll make it easy for you, Mr. Richard! I'll get you work, honest work! Nobody knows anything against you. I won't talk. And when you've made good, when you've shown the mettle you're made of, then you can come back to your mother! Make her proud of you! Your mother—and the girl!

B—The girl?

A—Yes. The girl you were going to marry.

B (after a pause)—Martin, you're a good fellow.

A (producing gun)—Give up this, and all it stands for! (Dully, B takes the gun from his outstretched hand.) Make a fresh start! (Producing wallet.) Here's money! (Handing it to him.) Take all you want. If you need more, I'll get it for you. Your clothes are shabby. Buy new ones. I'll give you a chance—the biggest kind of a chance—now make good!

B (after a pause)—Martin, can I live with you?

A—Can you live with me? No, Mr. Richard. Your mother mustn't know—yet.

B—But you're alone in the house.

A—It wouldn't do, Mr. Richard. I have my orders.

B—You're alone in the house.

A—Don't worry about that, Mr. Richard; I'll find you a place to live.

B—You're alone in the house!

A (taken aback)—Why, yes!

B—There's a safe in my mother's room.

A—Good God! (He springs up, but seizes him by the throat and raises the clubbed revolver.)

B—You're going to take me there!

A—No.

B—You're going to take me there!

A (screaming)—No, NO! NO!

B (menacing)—Another sound and I'll kill you!

A—Please, Mr. Richard!

B (raises gun threateningly and A stops)—You're alone in the house. You know the combination of the safe—

A—No, no!

B—Don't lie. You do. You're going to let me in. You're going to open the safe. And I'm going to make a haul—a big haul.

A (gasping)—Mr. Richard—I'll die first!

B—Yes! I've heard others say that! And I've known how to make them change their minds.

A—Oh!

B—Now listen to me! If you open the safe for me, I'll pay you—pay you well. You can tell the police a burglar broke in. They'll believe you.

A—No! No!

B—No? Well, here's the other choice. If you don't promise to help me, I'll help myself. You've got the key to the house in your pocket. (Raising gun.) I'll make a good job of it this time and I'll take it from you. I'll take myself in, and I'll open the safe without you. Don't worry! I know how!

A—Mr. Richard!

B—Ah, don't chew the rag! I got no time for it! Which'll it be? Will you help me—or (business) will I kill you and help myself?

A (desperately)—Mr. Richard!

B—Your answer! Quick!

A—Mr. Richard!

B—Yes or no?

A—Yes.

B—Ah! I thought you'd be reasonable! Want to save your hide? All right!

A (broken down)—I'll help you.

B (gesturing with gun)—I'll see to that.

A—I'll help you.

B (nods grimly)—Give me your hand on it!

A (change of expression)—My hand?

B—Yes, your hand. (They shake hands, and like a flash A seizes a ji-jitsu grip on his arm. B tries to strike A with the revolver, but cannot, and screams with pain.)

A—I'll help you! Yes, I'll help you!

A—No!

B—She's been blind for two years.

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B—And I'll see that her secretary doesn't let her know a word about it.

B—What? Mother has a secretary, while her little boy—

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B—The girl?

There's our friend, the policeman. Call him! He'll help you, too.

B—No. No!

A—Call him!

B (weakly)—Help!

A—Louder!

B—Help! Help!

A—Louder!

B—Help! HELP! POLICE! CURTAIN.

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